

Bookchin - Ocalan Correspondence

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Dear friends,

please allow me to introduce myself: My name is Reimar Heider, I am one of the German translators of the books of Abdullah Ocalan, political prisoner and most influential kurdish thinker and politician.

Ocalan has been in solitary confinement for the last five years now. During that time he has read the Turkish translations of some of Murray Bookchin's books, especially "The Ecology of Freedom" and "Towards an ecological society" which have influenced him deeply. He has re-built his political strategy around the vision of a "democratic-ecological-society" and developed a model to build up a civil society in Kurdistan and the Middle East. He has recommended Bookchin's books to every mayor in all kurdish cities and wanted everybody to read them.

I don't now whether Mr. Bookchin is informed about this, but I am sure he will be pleased to hear about it. His books, especially "The Ecology of Freedom" are read and discussed a lot now in Turkey and Kurdistan. (I myself have read "The Ecology of Freedom" in Turkish and German and given a seminary about it).

I am sorry that there are no english translations of Ocalan's latest books available yet. I would like very much to demonstrate the influence of Mr. Bookchin's and other books on him to you. But if some of you understand German I can send you some pages from his latest book

Unfortunately I was not able to find out Mr. Bookchin's e-Mail-address. I am sure you can help me with that if he has one. If not, I hope you can forward him my warmest greetings. I would very much like to get in touch with him.

Thanks for your help,

Reimar Heider

Dear Reimar Heider,

Thank you for your e-letter of April 6. You should know that I am quite an elderly man (83 years) who is virtually incapable of walking because of osteoarthritis and heart problems. I tell you this to explain why I am often delayed in responding to letters, especially e-mail. I should also caution you that people who profess to speak in my behalf do not necessarily speak for me—except for my companion, Janet Biehl, whose e-mail address I share and with whom I live. (Please note her e-mail address.)

Like most Americans, alas, I know very little about the PPK and Abdullah Ocalan, although I do recall news of his arrest several years ago. Thanks to our parochial press, Americans are barely informed about Kurdish affairs. (Even Iraqi Kurds are much neglected by our war correspondents.) I learned only a few days ago that Mr. Ocalan has been under a death sentence for five years and is presently in solitary confinement. I sincerely hope he is coping with his situation.

We are, however, knowledgeable about the German language, so you need not be troubled about whether we will understand the literature you sent us in that language. Send me what you like, although I will be obliged to respond in English. The problem I face in writing quickly is solely a matter of my failing health and medical problems.

You should also know that although I founded the Institute for Social Ecology, together with Dan Chodorkoff, some thirty years ago in Vermont, the school has since become highly diversified and does not consistently reflect my views. Part of its staff has drifted toward anarchistic views that I regard as juvenile and uninformed, with which I have no sympathy. I say this to ask you to write directly to me at Janet's e-mail address, where I can at least enjoy a private correspondence free of interference from these "libertarian" children.

For myself, I have been active in the American Left for some seventy years as a labor organizer and a teacher. In short, I am a walking history of the twentieth century in my own way and have always tried to look beyond ideas that people freeze into dogmas. THE ECOLOGY OF FREEDOM and TOWARDS AN ECOLOGICAL SOCIETY both date back to the 1980s. Moreover, you should know that THE ECOLOGY OF FREEDOM was only partially translated into German. (I believe, however, that the Turkish translation is complete.) I have also written books and articles on my concept of libertarian municipalism, confederalism, the meaning of politics as distinguished from parliamentarism, and the lessons to be learned from the revolutionary tradition. (I have recently completed a four-volume book on this last topic, the third volume of which is to be published next month by Continuum Publishers in London.) These writings—especially THE RISE OF URBANIZATION AND THE DECLINE OF CITIZENSHIP, which has been translated into both German and Turkish—may be of interest to you and Mr. Ocalan. These more recent writings have provoked considerable interest in Latin America, Scandinavia and other parts of Europe, and Australia.

Much remains to be explored, which my health and age prohibit me from doing. If you care to write to me further, I ask you to please be patient with an old radical. I wish to express my deep concern for Mr. Ocalan.

Cordially,
Murray Bookchin
131 Main Street, apt. 301
Burlington, VT 05401 USA
tel.: (802) 863-4545
jbiehl@together.net

[May 5, 2004]

Dear Murray Bookchin,

We are pleased to inform you that following our correspondence, we briefed Mr Ocalan's Istanbul-based defense lawyers as to the contents of

your letter. A member of the defense team, Mr Aydinkaya, briefly mentioned the issue to Mr Ocalan during the last legal visit. Mr Ocalan

was apparently very pleased about your concern and asked his representatives to get back to you immediately. He sent his warmest regards and stated that the two writers he is currently most engaged with were yourself and Immanuel Wallerstein. Mr Ocalan emphasized that he thought he had acquired a good understanding of your ideas; as a matter of fact, he spoke of himself as a good student of yours. He instructed his lawyers to send you his latest manuscript as soon as possible. This is a manuscript he has just drafted for the 9 June 2004 hearing of his case before the Grand Chamber of the European Human Rights Court. The translation of the document into the English language

is being done by a company in Turkey; we hope to be able to present you

a readable copy of the text by June.

Mr Ocalan said he regretted that there were some shortcomings in the Turkish translation of the four books of yours which he has read, and that there were some points on which he disagrees with your ideas.

What

he specifically emphasized, however, was that he was eager to follow up

your thought and help bring it to further fruition in terms of their applicability to Middle Eastern societies. He would like to assure you that you need not be too concerned about some of your younger

followers

lack of appreciation for the subtleties and dynamic of your thought, since the Kurdish freedom movement was determined to successfully implement your ideas. He added something to the effect that he believed

the three books he has written in prison taken together could offer some

answers to theoretical and practical predicaments Marxist Theory has been unable to come to terms with over the last 150 years. He clearly states now that he thinks it is theoretically untenable to conceive of the formation of the state in Early Mesopotamia as an 'inexorable' development dictated by historical causalities and 'necessary' for 'human progress'. In this new manuscript, Mr Ocalan re-evaluates some of

his earlier arguments on the transition from Neolithic to early hieratic

state society and makes some incredibly original points about the epistemological ramifications of chaos theory for historical and social studies, and for the political perspectives that are being derived from theoretical conceptionalisations of human history. He both explores the consequences this has for his own conception of Mesopotamian history, and for the political conclusions he has drawn from his earlier work, thus completely abandoning the paradigm of state-building as the objective of emancipatory processes. He further elaborates on the concept of an eco-democratic society and the practical implementation of libertarian municipalism in Kurdistan.

He emphasized, however, that his was not and could never be the work of an academic but that of someone searching for practical ways out of the crisis the Middle East and the Kurds are in. He voiced some stunning criticism of Western scientific discourse and emphasized that his own approach would always be informed by a contemporary re-reading of traditional Middle Eastern discourses.

In spite of the obvious difficulties in communicating with Mr Ocalan, we are more than happy to assist you in furthering your communication with him.

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Warmest regards,
Reimar Heider
Oliver Kontny

May 9, 2004

Dear Reimar,

Thank you for conveying Mr. Ocalan's comments to me. I am pleased that he finds my ideas on libertarian municipalism to be helpful in thinking about a future Kurdish body politic.

I also appreciate your efforts to mediate a dialogue between Mr. Ocalan and myself. I beg you to understand that I am a very frail 83 years old; that I can no longer sit before a word processor for hours and write articles or even letters; and that even reading for more than a few hours per day is difficult for me. (Even with this brief letter, I had need of Janet's help.) I am obliged to spend much of my time in bed. As such, I am not in a position to carry on an extensive theoretical dialogue with Mr. Ocalan, as much as I would like to, and can at best provide only brief and incomplete responses. I deeply regret the loss, but have increasingly to come to terms with the inexorability of aging and mortality.

Mr. Ocalan seems concerned to impress on me that he needs to draw on other intellectual sources as well as mine, especially Middle Eastern ones. He should please rest assured that I would be deeply troubled if he did not make full use of those other sources as well.

Please give Mr. Ocalan my best wishes. My hope is that the Kurdish people will one day be able to establish a free, rational society that will allow their brilliance once again to flourish. They are fortunate indeed to have a leader of Mr. Ocalan's talents to guide them.

With warm regards,

Murray Bookchin

Dear Janet Biehl, dear Murray Bookchin,

We would like to inform you that your kind letter with your positive remarks about Mr. Ocalan has meanwhile been read at the 2nd general assembly of the Kurdistan People's Congress, which took place in the Kurdish mountains this summer, and has been much applauded.

The imprisonment conditions of Mr. Ocalan have not improved, in fact he has even more limited possibility to communicate with the outer world or even his lawyers and family now. Therefore it is becoming increasingly difficult to organize an exchange of thoughts through the walls of his prison cell. However, in several of the rare meetings with his lawyers he again recommended Murray Bookchin's books, especially "Urbanization without Cities".

We have sent you before a part of his 2003 book where he refers to the remodelling of communality in Kurdish villages and cities. In his latest book, which appeared this year in Turkish, he gives much more room to the rise of hierarchy in human society and emphasizes especially the patriarchal character of hierarchic and class civilization. He presents a model of civilisation, which does not concentrate on class struggle alone, but sees the "natural society" as the opponent of class society throughout history. The "natural" society manifests itself in form of ethnic groups, class movements and religious and philosophical groups which defend their freedom. In his view, the subduing of women plays the key role in subduing the free individuals. Therefore he gives a broad description of the process of establishing the patriarchal system.

The book also contains a very explicit criticism of classic dogmatic Marxism, which Mr. Ocalan commits to have adhered to himself for too long. He especially criticizes real socialism's approach to violence, power and the state. A revolutionary group that does not differ fundamentally from its opponents regarding these topics would be doomed to be absorbed by the system like real socialism has been absorbed by capitalism.

He regards the women's movement as the most important revolutionary movement of the 20th century, because with its analysis of sexism in all spheres of society and especially of the social sciences it has revealed more of the essential conflicts in society than any other school of thoughts did before.

In his works Mr. Ocalan's frequently refers to concepts like ecological society and libertarian municipalism, although he stresses different points from you (Murray Bookchin).

Dear Janet,

from what we know of your publications, which unfortunately have not been translated to Turkish yet, you also might be interested in discussing or criticizing Mr. Ocalan's points of view. We know that he welcomes criticism, especially because his possibility to discuss his thoughts are extremely limited due to his solitary confinement, which has been lasting for almost 6 years now.

Since the beginning of the eighties a women's movement has been emerging in Kurdistan, which has gained considerable strength today. The developing of this women's movement is closely linked to the Kurdish liberation struggle and Mr. Ocalan's efforts. His debates with the Kurdish women's movement about the position of women in society have influenced him most considerably, and the thoughts quoted above are discussed most intensively in the women's movement today.

Kurdish women in exile in Europe are very much interested in building a bridge between the debates that are led in the mountains and cities of Kurdistan and movements and activists in other parts of the world. The Kurdish women's movement in Germany, where most of the exiled Kurds live, therefore organized the *1st International Women's Festival* this summer, to broaden the discussion about the perspectives of the Kurdish liberation struggle and the role of women in society. Women from different countries took place in discussions on peace and violence against women. The slogan of the festival was "Women cross borders and come together!". In 2005 the main topic of the 2nd festival will be ecology. We would like to invite women from all parts of the world and wondered whether you in principle might be interested to join our discussions.

Dear Uta Schneiderbanger and Reimar Heider,

It is thrilling to learn that Murray Bookchin's remarks were read to the second general assembly of the Kurdistan People's Congress last summer, and it is gratifying to know that many Kurdish people now view his ideas favorably.

Thank you very much for your letter of December 10, and please accept my apologies for the delay in replying to you. I delayed because Murray said he wanted to write to you, and I believe this wish is genuine, but to date his health has prevented him from doing so.

For us, carrying on a correspondence with you (and with everyone) has been difficult because Murray's health is steadily declining. His level of pain from osteoarthritis is increasing, and yes, he does take painkillers, but his choice is to limit them so they do not interfere with his mental functioning. So he is in a constant battle against pain, which is very demoralizing. Lately, as he approaches his 84th birthday, he frequently becomes confused and disoriented, unable to understand many simple conversations. As his caregiver as well as his companion, this is perhaps the hardest thing to cope with. Yet he retains his basic good judgment, his spirit is still warm, expansive, and loving, and especially recently he has become fascinated with all news he gets about Kurds and Kurdish issues. You have become a beacon for him in his declining years.

I am greatly honored by your invitation to be included in discussions about ecology with the Kurdish women's movement. About fifteen years ago I wrote a book that was critical of "ecofeminism" for its reactionary nature; since then "ecofeminism" has all but disappeared from movement discourse (although I understand some academics here still dither about it). Since then I was not much involved with the feminist movement, as I preferred to work as an advocate of social ecology.

Today I do not function as much of anything politically, because of my work taking care of the elderly Murray. As he has retired from politics, I have reduced my activities as well in order to care for him. So I do not think I would be able to participate in your discussions very frequently, or be able to make a substantial contribution to them. But I am very grateful for the invitation and wish you a fruitful exchange.

I will pass on immediately anything Murray is able to write to you and to Ocalan. Please give him our very best regards.

With warm greetings,
Janet Biehl
Burlington, Vermont